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**SOME ASPECTS OF ETHNIC ART AND CULTURAL PRACTICES FOR COMMUNITY
 EMPOWERMENT: A STUDY OF SINGPHOS OF ASSAM, INDIA**

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ABSTRACT

Assam state of India is largely inhabited by various groups of people. Each group have their own distinct arts and culture. Art and culture are powerful tools at various levels of changes to empower community. In this paper, an attempt has been made to discuss and understand community empowerment from the perspective of community based art and cultural practices. Special references are given to the Singpho community of Assam. The study is based on both primary and secondary sources. Certain aspects like Singpho traditional tea, Singpho traditional lodge, art, crafts and textiles, festivals and cross border cultural interactions are discussed which may promote tourism and be a source of economic development of the community.

Keywords: Assam, empowerment, art and culture, Singphos

INTRODUCTION

Community is a group of people who share common norms, values, identity and have a numerical presence in a common area. When people of a community organise themselves for development with a maximum reliance upon community resources then comes the community empowerment. India is a huge diverse country where numerous communities reside in both rural and urban areas. To improve growth parameters in rural economies, engagement with people at the grassroots and creation of sustainable livelihoods becomes pertinent (Roy, 2018). Promoting ethnic art and cultural practices have a very important role in supporting community empowerment and Assam state of India is not an exception to this.

Assam is a north eastern state of India located south to the eastern Himalayas along the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys. It is the largest state where amongst eight north eastern states of the country. It shares border with Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh to the north, Nagaland and Manipur to the east, Meghalaya, Tripura, Mizoram and Bangladesh to the south and West Bengal to the west (Sajnani, 2001). The history of Assam goes back to the times of Mahabharata when Assam was then known by the name 'Pragjyotisha' or 'Prachya'. In medieval period historical texts mentioned Assam as 'Kamrupa'. The modern name Assam is believed to be originated from a Sanskrit term 'Asam' meaning 'unique or incompetence' (Bhushan, 2005). Some scholars also believed that the name Assam is derived from the word 'Ahom' (Bhandarri and Kale, 2008-09). The Ahom are a subgroup of Tai speaking people who migrated to Assam in the 13th century and



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ruled for almost 600 years (Ghosh, 2001). The Ahoms reorganised its culture, civilization and natural surroundings and established their dominion in the region. Owing to the fact that Assam shares border with many states and nations, it has become setting grounds for many civilizations that came via different routes. With the growth of different civilizations various faiths, religions and cultures flourished in Assam since time immemorial. Today the complete populous of Assam can be divided as Indo Aryan speakers, Sino Tibetan speakers, Tibeto Burman speakers, Austro Asiatic speakers and the Tai Kadai speakers etc. Since Assam is a home to various ethnic communities it became a religious diverse land. Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Animism etc. are some of the major religions (Tunkhang, Chow Kensan 'Religion, its Longevity and Changes : A study of Tai in Assam', paper submitted in the 9th Biennial International Conference of Indian Association for Asian and Pacific studies, Chandigarh, 2018, November 1-2).

The Singphos are a tribal community who are found in Tinsukia and Sibsagar districts of Assam and adjacent parts of Arunachal Pradesh. The Singphos are Jinghpaw speakers of Tibeto Burman family (Diller, 2008; Hanson, 2012). They are identical to the Kachin, the name which Burmese applied to the Jinghpaw speakers and their sister languages in Myanmar (Mackenzie, 1989). However the Singphos of Assam do not call themselves as Kachin. According to the history, they migrated to Assam in the eighteenth century from Hukawng valley of Myanmar by crossing the Patkai range (Rao, 2006). As a hill tribe, they were very wild in nature and their importance strongly felt in the history of Ahom kingdom of Assam. Today they follow Theravada Buddhism and are closely related to the Tai Khamti and Burmese in the field of religion (Yupang, 2018). However, they did not give up their indigenous beliefs and practices which are revolve around the existence of 'Nats' or spirits (Baruah, 1977).

Among the Singphos, the concepts of community empowerment both are very well defined. They have understood to take the benefit of ethnic art and cultural practices not only in empowerment sector but also to preserve their rich culture and traditions. It has deeply influenced the mindset of youth and women particularly to engage in community based organisation. After few decades celebrating their main festival Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi for the first time in 1985, they understood tourism which became the main element in supporting community empowerment. The establishment of the Singpho eco lodge in Inthong village near Margherita, Assam uplifted tourism. The objective of this study is to find out how the Singpho community built up their economy through ethnic art and culture which helped empowering community.

The study was based on both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include data collections, observation, interview and news papers. Secondary sources include books, journals and articles.



SINGPHO TRADITIONAL LODGE

The Singpho eco lodge is located in Inthong village of Tinsukia district in Assam. It was established in the year 2007 in order to promote Singpho culture, rural and ethnic tourism and ultimately to generate income and promote community empowerment. Here the community preserves tradition and culture for tourists. It is located in the middle of a huge tea garden. The lodge is designed in a typical Singpho hut built on raised floors, thatched roofs and made with bamboo, wood and leaves. The lodge has all the basic infrastructural facilities and provides all the facilities to tourists to visit the locality as well as the region.

The Singphos here exhibits their local art and craft, traditional cuisines and music and dances. Inside the lodge has a small shop which sells traditional handlooms and handicrafts. The Singpho recipes like Khao-laam (bamboo rice), Pasa (raw fish soup), Tong tep (rice cakes), Pungkhang Sat (steamed rice) etc. are available and attract tourists.

Below table includes numbers of tourists visited in the lodge in the year 2015 to 2018 till date.

Table: 1

Income generated from tourists since 2015 to 2018 till date

Sl.no	Types of tea	no. of tourists	Income
1	Domestic	7555	Rs.408000
2	Foreign	255	Rs.2266500
		Total:	Rs.2674500

* The data has been collected from a documented record maintained by the Singpho community of Inthong village, Assam.

From the above table 1 it is found that during the period 2015 to 2018 till date 7555 domestic tourists and 255 foreign tourists visited the lodge and amount of Rs. 4,080,00 has been generated from domestic tourists and amount of 2,26,6500 has been generated from foreign tourists.

SINGPHO TEA

The Singphos are known and drank tea for many years before the discovery of tea by the British in India. It was Mr. Bruce and his late brother in the eighteenth century who discovered tea from the Singphos (Baruwa, 2008). The Britishers have kept a vivid record of the shipment of tea from Assam to Britain. Ningroo Laa, the Singpho chief with collaboration with Britishers sold tea at Calcutta market amounting 480 pounds (Dutta, 2018). The first batch of 12 boxes of Singpho tea was shipped from Calcutta to London in 1835 (Indian Tea Association, 1889-1989). Since then the consumption of tea started in India. But however, the uniqueness and manufacturing of Singpho traditional tea remained limited to them. The traditional Singpho teas are of two types, they are 'Phalap' (loose leaf tea) and Ndum phalap (bamboo tube tea). Santoshini (2016) while writing on



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the Singpho tea stated that, “The Singphos process the tea by first heating the leaves in a pan until they brown, and then sun drying them for a few days. To make the more powerful flavour, smoked tea, the sun dried leaves are tightly packed in bamboo tubes and smoked over a fire. After a week storing these bamboos, the processed tea hardens to take the shape of the tube. It can be preserved for up to 10 years, with small portions sliced off with a knife to brew a fresh cup of tea. The leaves can be reused to brew two to three cups, the flavour gets better with each infusion.”

According to Singpho people the tea has medicinal value. They say that a cup after every meal aids digestion and believed that it has kept the community relatively free from cancer and diabetes. This is the reason it gained much popularity not only in the country but in many foreign nations.

Below tables show the sale of Singpho tea during the period 2015 to 2018 till date.

Table: 2

Income generated from Tea since 2015 to 2018 till date

Sl.no.	Year	Type of tea	Quantity	Price range per kg	Income
1	2015	loose tea	182	Rs.2000	Rs.3,64,000
		Bamboo	30	Rs.7000	Rs.2,10,000
2	2016	loose tea	224	Rs.2000	Rs.4,48,000
		Bamboo	24	Rs.7000	Rs.1,68,000
3	2017	loose tea	320	Rs.2000	Rs.6,40,000
		Bamboo	100	Rs.7000	Rs.7,00,000
4	2018	loose tea	120	Rs.2000	Rs.2,40,000
Total :					Rs.27,70,000

* The data has been collected from a documented record maintained by the Singpho community of Inthong village, Assam.

From the table 2 it can be known that tea producers during the period 2015 to 2018 till date have generated handsome amount of money. It is evident that in every succeeding year the quantity of tea increases and generate greater amount of money.

SINGPHO ART, CRAFT AND TEXTILES

In Assam every houses has weaver's loom in almost all villages. Generally the knowledge of weaving is considered an essential part of a girl's education. In Arunachal Pradesh District Gazatters, Volume 3 has been said that a considerable number of Singpho women are engaged in weaving, who makes their own traditional costumes. Likewise, a Singpho boy automatically gets training in different handicrafts even in his very childhood (Baruah, 1977). The Singpho men are expert in cane and bamboo products and also carved out beautiful wooden sculptures.

The traditional costume of Singpho women include Bukang (sarong), Nangwat (a cloth worn around the chest), Singket (a belt), Kumphong plong (a special dress adorned with silver pieces). The men wear a black shirt and Bapa (sarong). Both men and women wear a special turban called



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Bumban. One of the important sources to attract tourists is through the exhibition of Singpho art, craft and textiles. Their handloom and handicraft products are in great demand among both domestic and foreign tourists. Tanushri Roy gave examples as promoting local craft production and supporting performing art innovations with viable business models can help to empower community.

Below table shows the sale of handloom products in the Singpho lodge during the period 2015 and 2018 till date..

Table: 3

Income generated from Handloom since 2015 to 2018 till date

Sl.no	Year	Products	Income
1	2015	Handloom	Rs.130000
2	2016	Handloom	Rs.120000
3	2017	Handloom	Rs.160000
4	2018	Handloom	Rs.130000
		Total:	Rs.4,40,000

* The data has been collected from a documented record maintained by the Singpho community of Inthong village, Assam.

Table 3 shows that the lodge has generated income of Rs. 130000 in 2015, Rs. 120000 in 2016, Rs. 160000 in 2017 and Rs. 130000 in the year 2018 till date.

SINGPHO FESTIVAL

The Singpho people have two major festivals in a year. One is Poi Sangken which is celebrated in mid April by cleaning Buddha statues with water. Another is Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi, a dance festival to pay respect to their ancestors and is popularly called Manau Poi in Myanmar and Yunan province of China. According to Machey, the concept of ethnic tourism has gained much importance among them after Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi was celebrated in the year 1985. Since the Singphos have their kinsmen in China and Myanmar, the cross border cultural interactions also promote tourism in this region. Every year number of tourists from those countries come to join them in this festival. Moreover, this festival also attracts many domestic tourists, Singpho people from rural areas also get chance to exhibit and sell traditional recipes, handloom and handicraft products.

CONCLUSION

India is a very diverse nation where various communities live, both in urban and rural areas. Development of communities residing in rural areas can only be brought through the core of their grassroots. The Singphos are one of the important tribal community of Assam who migrated from



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Hukawng valley of Myanmar in the 18th century. After few decades celebrating their most important festival for the first time in 1985, they started understanding Tourism and how they can use ethnic art and practices to support Community empowerment. The establishment of Singpho Eco lodge in 2007 at Inthong village, Magherita, Assam uplifted tourism in the region. They promote and preserve their art, handicraft, handlooms, food, etc. in the Singpho Eco lodge. The lodge itself is made and designed in their typical Singpho style houses. It is located in the middle of a huge tea garden. Also, the Singphos are known and have been drinking tea even before the Britishers discovered tea in India. Their tea is very unique which has medicinal values as well. All these ethnic art and cultural practices attract tourists and generate good income through their sales. Each succeeding year its becoming more popular among the tourists, the tea plantation has also increased leading to more sales resulting in good income. With good income, it has become easier to bring in development in the community which ultimately leads to the strengthening of Community Empowerment.

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